

THE HAUNTED HOUSE.

Its Interesting History and Strange Romance.

Events in the Life of Madame Lalaurie Called to Mind.

Cable's Fiction and a Few Facts.

In the rue Royale stands this quaint, old-fashioned house about which so much has been written, and around which cluster so many wild and weird stories, that even in this philosophic day, few in the old faubourg care to pass the place after nightfall, or, doing so, shudder and hurry on with bated breath, as though midnight ghouls and ghosts hovered near, ready to exercise a mystic spell over all who dare invade its uncanny precincts.

"La maison ost hantée," that is what the Franco-Spanish residents of the "vieux carre" will shake their heads and tell you; and every one who lives in the rue Royale, whether descendants of the ancient habitants or member of that recent cosmopolitan element that has invaded the street, knows the history of that old house, and repeats in guarded whispers, "The house is haunted," and will volunteer strange stories of how ghosts and spirits may be seen flitting mysteriously about the rooms after nightfall, how the witches and hob-goblins hold high revel there, of the strange, unearthly noises that proceed from the damp dungeon and attic, the mysterious, lambent lights that flit rapidly from window to window and then vanish, only to reappear with confused rapidity, and the long, ghostly procession that winds up the stairway at midnight, and peers cautiously over the roof, where the figure of a little child may be seen upon moonlight nights haunting the latticed belvedere. And all this began long ago, when the great house was shut up for many years, and broken windows and defaced galleries told the story of the uprising of an indignant populace and laid the foundation for the wild and ghostly legends which succeeding years have woven about it. No house in the rue Royale has attracted such widespread attention. Every stranger who visits New Orleans inquires for it, artists have painted it, and travelers have written about it, and several years ago Geo. W. Cable made it the subject of a special article in the Century Magazine. How much of that story is true, and how much the creation of Mr. Cable's fancy the old Creoles of New Orleans will tell you; but this fact remains, that the house has a history, a real, true history, that needs neither imagination nor art to make it one of the most interesting studies in New Orleans, both from a historical and a romantic point of view.

A grand old place, even in its decay, is "the haunted house." For many years it was the great mansion of the old faubourg. It towered high above every other house in the French quarter, and every night a slave mounted the belvedere and hung out from the quaint observatory a signal-light as a guide to way-faring travelers. In our day of tall buildings, even from Canal street, in the distance one can see far down the right-hand side of the rue Royale, at the intersection of Hospital street, above the confused mass of buildings that intervene, the square latticed remnant of the belvedere, and walking briskly on, the old-fashioned house in all its gloom and departed glory stands before you. What a large, solid, rectangular mass it is, with its three stories and attic and gray stuccoed front and sides; an uncovered iron balcony reaches out to the edge of the sidewalk and forms a deep arcade around the two streets. The entrance is in the rue Royale, just midway under the balcony, and it is itself worth the study of the antiquarian. The walls and ceiling of the deep white portico are curiously ornamented; a pair of great gates of open ornamental iron-work shut it in from the street, and within the deep recess opening upon a marble hallway is a great, wide door, exquisitely wrought with urns and flowers and birds, with a unique central piece of Phœbus in his chariot. In the marble hallway there rises an iron-railed staircase, that winds like a spiral column to the drawing-room and sleeping apartments above.

The drawing-rooms are spacious, and the different doors that lead to them, and the great folding doors between, are ornamented with panels beautifully carved in flowers and human faces. All around the walls of these three great rooms there extends a deep frieze, covered with raised work representing angels with folded wings and holding palm branches; the lofty ceilings and framework of the doors are beautifully carved with stars and raised garlands of flowers. The fire-places are high and old-fashioned; the chandeliers are rare and quaint, with the numerous crystal pendants so much in vogue in aristocratic homes in the old days. The windows—high and wide—measure seven feet across, and are not between fluted Corinthian pilasters, and open upon the broad balcony. At the end of one of these rooms there was, some years ago, a little door, with large iron hinges, which opened upon a small, dark place, without steps to lead down to the floor beneath. Many strange stories have been connected with this door—thrilling, blood-curdling stories which no one could ever authenticate, but which floated out at times upon the rue Royale, and are a part of the many wild traditions which surround the old house.

From the roof the second story communicates with the third by staircases behind a lattice-work, and, looking down, one sees a small, damp, paved court yard, entirely hidden from the outer view. From the main building a long, narrow annex four stories high, with latticed galleries along the entire length of each floor, extends at right angles. Each story is divided into a number of small square rooms, with a single high window and a door opening upon the latticed gallery. Several of these rooms have sturdy iron grates and solid iron shutters. The attic in the fourth floor is out up into little closets, having big iron keys and iron

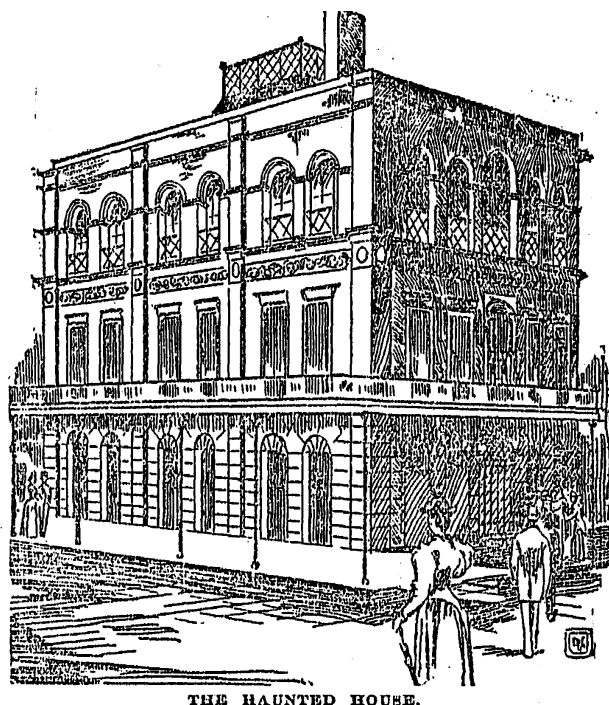
locks. A rickety staircase leads from the attic to the belvedere, from which, perhaps, one of the finest views in the city of New Orleans can be obtained.

So much for the structure of the old house, curious, complicated and interesting, but not more so than the history which attaches to it. At what period exactly the building was erected, no one in New Orleans seems to know, even the ancient Creoles having a very vague idea. Old traditions assert that it was once the property of the Pontalba family; that the duc d'Orleans (afterward Louis Philippe, king of France), and his brother, the duc de Montpensier, were once honored guests in the old mansion, and slept in the apartment on the southern corner of the second floor. The marquis de Lafayette was also entertained in this house, and occupied the same room as the illustrious guest who preceded him.

In 1831 the house belonged to Edmond Soniat du Fossat, and many old Creoles say that the Soniat family originally owned the house, having built it for speculative purposes. In 1831 Mons. Soniat sold the property to Mme. Lalaurie, and here the historic portion of the old building's history ends and its strange, weird story begins.

Mme. Lalaurie was possessed of great wealth, in money, real estate and slaves, all her own by right of inheritance. She had been married three times, the present husband being Dr. Lalaurie. Young, beautiful, accomplished, born and reared in the upper circles of society, madame liked nothing better than to queen it in her stately drawing-rooms, where she dispensed a hospitality which made her the envy of the aristocratic faubourg. She had filled the old house with elegant furniture, rare and costly gold and silver plate, and bric-a-brac and pictures by noted artists, while her splendid equipage and horses were the central feature of an evening in the famous drives along the old Bayou road, where all fashionable New Orleans went for an airing.

Her manners were sweet, gracious and captivating, her voice was said to be as soft as a low strain of music; even in New Orleans she was noted for her charitable deeds, and yet—and yet—there were wild rumors that madame inflicted the most cruel tortures upon her slaves, that she whipped and flogged them unmercifully; that in that splendid house behind those attic windows there were human beings chained to the floor, confined in darkness and actually starving to death. And the curious door in the wall—well, there were rumors enough about



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it, but they were vague and floated about the rue Royale like a shadowy mist at evening. And still, those who visited madame in those days, said that she was kind to her servants and scouted the idea of ill treatment. Did one of them tremble in her presence or start at the sound of her voice, she would say kindly "ce ne fait rien, ma fille," and endeavor to reassure her; nevertheless, the stories of inhuman barbarity increased, the smothered indignation in the rue Royale grew, and one day the street was filled with the wild rumor that madame had been seen by the neighbors coddling a little girl in the courtyard; that the terrified little negress fled across the yard, into the house, and up the winding stairway from gallery to gallery, followed by her infuriated mistress; that she was seen to rush out into the belvedere and dart upon the roof, with Mme. Lalaurie close at her heels. In another instant the child reached the sheer edge of the roof and fell with a dull thud to the courtyard below, and was lifted up and borne into the house a silent, crushed mass of humanity. In this old yard there is a well of slight depth, that is now a mere pit, and the neighbors asserted that at nightfall the child was buried by torchlight in this well.

In his article in the Century Magazine, Mr. Cable dwells particularly upon this story. The only comment upon it is the expressed wonder that in a city like New Orleans such a deed could occur without the authorities taking action upon it. But the day of retribution was at hand. In April, 1834, an old negress, galled to death by the cruelties heaped upon her, set fire to Mme. Lalaurie's kitchen. There is a vague tradition that the old woman had a dream the night before, and, seeing the house in flames, caught at the inspiration. The alarm of "Fire!"

spread through the streets, and in an instant the house was thronged with people eager to assist Mme. Lalaurie in saving her valuable effects. There were among the crowd citizens of high standing, and many who are now living were eye-witnesses to the scenes that followed. The fire was gaining rapidly, the kitchen was in flames and the upper stories were filled with smoke. It is said that madame was never more self-possessed than upon that day; she busied herself handing to her friends plates, jewels and robes that those might be saved from destruction. "But where are the servants?" were the questions on a hundred different lips; "Where are all Mme. Lalaurie's servants, that they do not help in the efforts to save?" These inquiries were met by madame in evasive answers, "Never mind the servants! save my valuables; this way, gentlemen! this way!"

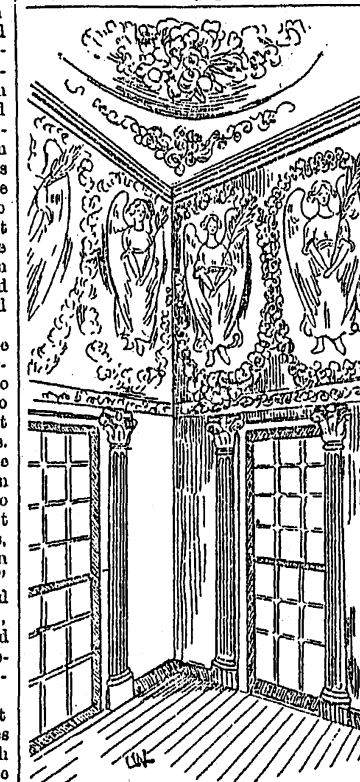
Someone whispered that the servants were chained and locked up behind barred doors in the slave quarter and liable to perish in the flames. The whisper became a voice, loud, vengeful, threatening. "The servants! the servants!" rose from a hundred different voices; "there are human beings locked in those rooms who will be roasted alive in the flames." "The keys! the keys!" cried a Creole gentleman; two or three men rushed forward clamoring for the keys, but they could not be found. "Who will follow me through the smoke and flames?" cried a brave Creole. A dozen or more gentleman volunteered. The iron bars between the wing and attic were broken away, the doors were burst open and two old negresses, with heavy iron collars upon their necks and irons upon their feet, were brought out. By this time, through superhuman effort, the fire was subdued. "Let the search go on!" clamored the crowd. The garret was explored and more victims were brought out—gaunt, wild-eyed human beings, loaded with chains and crippled from the attitudes in which they had been chained to the floor.

At the sight of these miserable creatures the crowd groaned with horror and pity. Some one suggested to search for dead bodies, and when two skeletons were brought out the tumult and indignation knew no bounds. Mme. Lalaurie secreted herself in the great hallway looked behind the iron bars. But the crowd had no time to think of her yet. In pity they brought food and drink to the poor sufferers, and then carried them tenderly upon litters to the cabildo or "calaboose," which stood in the next block, and there fully 2000 people visited them, taking food and drink and clothing and words of cheer and comfort. But before the day was out two of the victims had died.

A silence fell upon the faubourg, but it was the ominous silence that precedes the outbreak of the smoldering wrath of an outraged public. During the morning an idle crowd hung about the Lalaurie mansion, the numbers increased towards midday and by evening the throng was so dense that standing room was almost impossible upon the pavement. They hissed and hooted and some cried out for satisfaction. Madame Lalaurie did not mistake the meaning and conceived and executed a bold plan for flight. Promptly at the hour at which she was accustomed to take her usual drive her carriage drove up before the door and madame, dressed in her usual elegant style, stepped out upon the sidewalk and entered the vehicle. In a second more the horses were going at full speed over the clean, smooth shells of Bayou Road. Madame was taking her last drive in the fashionable quarter, and it was a drive for life itself. It took but an in-

while hunting a wild bear in the forest at Paris. She died in Paris, in her own home, surrounded by her family.

Here ends the story of Mme. Lalaurie, but not so that of the old house. Upon the evening of her departure the infuriated mob, baffled in their attempt to capture her, retraced their steps, when they were overtaken by the coachman returning with the carriage. He thought that he could lash his horses through the throng, but he failed in his reckoning. The animals were stopped and killed, the carriage was broken to pieces, and the coachman, by some strange luck, made his escape. Then the crowd returned to Mme. Lalaurie's house and the work of destruction began. Doors and windows were broken open; mirrors and plate and china were smashed into atoms, bedding and table linen and curtains were thrown into the streets; elegant pianos, armoires, tables, sofas, and cabinets were taken into the third story, thrown from the windows and broken into a thousand pieces upon the pavement below. Night fell, torches were lit and the work of destruction kept on; great bonfires were made of the debris of furniture and mattresses in the streets, and while the mob without cheered, that within mounted and battered the roof, smashed the windows and defaced the doors and walls. When morning dawned they were still engaged in the work



A DRAWING-ROOM CORNER IN THE HAUNTED HOUSE.

of destruction. Some one suggested that the walls be demolished, but conservative citizens intervened; the house was closed and it stood for many days silent, uninhabited, a monument to the vengeance of the outraged faubourg.

In 1837 Mme. Lalaurie's agent sold the house to a gentleman, who kept it only three months. Strange stories began to be whispered about the old place, stories of ghosts and evil spirits, of strange lights and unearthly noises. The neighbors were often startled by seeing the doors swing open untouched by human hands, and close violently, and the windows were seen to rise up and fall again without a soul being near. Several times it was routed at short intervals, sometimes the rooms were let out to various families, but those tenants did not remain long. For a few months a furniture store flourished in the basement, and at another time a barber shop, hung out its painted pole; but these were only for a while; the work of decay was progressing, and still the romance of its early days was but a prelude to that of its later.

After the war, during the period of reconstruction, the radical school board of New Orleans threw open the doors of all the white public schools to the freed negroes, and the city beheld the strange sight of white and colored children sitting at the same desks in the free halls of learning. About this time the school board, looking around for an eligible site for the location of a high school for the girls of the lower district, selected "the haunted house." The building was thrown open and renovated, and in a few days, the ancient rooms of the aristocratic Mme. Lalaurie witnessed strange sights. Side by side, upon the same school bench, sat the pure Caucasian girls of New Orleans and the Africans who had but a few years before been their slaves. There were two distinct factions in that old house, the one placed upon a plane of social equality with an inferior race, which it bitterly opposed; the other aggressive, with the law behind it, seeking to force itself into a higher sphere. The white girls, forced through the disastrous fortunes of the war to attend the public schools if they desired an education, resented the intrusion of girls of mixed blood as well as those of pure African descent. Hard words often passed between the two races, and many a girl's fair cheek was wet with tears and crimsoned with indignation at the humiliation heaped by a victorious foe upon a down-trodden and superior people. So matters went on until the 15th of September, 1874, when the White League rose in arms and defeated the metropolitan police. The federal authority interfered, but the White League grew in power, and one day in December a large delegation marched to the old house in rue Royale and interviewed the principal of the school. The leader showed the badge of the White League, and said that the band had come to remove the colored pupils from the school. The principal was instructed to assemble the class and call the roll, each name of pupils suspected of having colored blood being challenged as it was read. There was a panic among the expelled girls, but they were kindly dealt with, merely being gathered into an adjoining room and ordered to follow the leader through the open portal into the street. And so they passed the great iron gates, but a few weeks later they were reinstated by the Radical school board, and, in 1877, the girls who had been expelled in 1874 held their "commencement day" with their white mistresses, and received their diplomas side by side in the very room that had once harbored Louis Philippe and the marquis de Lafayette. But the Democratic school board came in that year, separate schools for whites and blacks were immediately established, and the next year saw the haunted house turned into a high school for colored girls; it lasted one session and then perished forever.

In 1882 an enterprising Englishman opened a conservatory of music and fashionable dancing school in the parlors of the haunted house. He came with high references and drew his pupils from the best element of society. The most noted vocal and instrumental music professors of the French and American quarters were engaged to instruct the pupils. For a while all went well. Music and light and laughter filled the great apartments, and it was pretty of a spring evening, at the weekly soirees, to watch the girls in their light and graceful costumes flitting about the great rooms and over the broad balcony to the measured strains of music, while ever and anon the rich voice of a tenor or contralto trilled through the apartments and floated out upon the dreamy street. But the ghosts of the past were all there, "dancing on the waves of melody." A grand soiree, concert and musicale had been planned for the ensuing week; the well known talent of the artists who were to appear made the invitations eagerly sought after. The morning arrived and preparations were rife in the old faubourg; that very day some scurrilous publication attacked the character of the gentleman who presided over the conservatory. By evening every one who had been engaged to play, sing or attend had heard the news; all but the host himself, who stood in full evening dress, in the brilliant apartments awaiting the arrival of his guests. But no one came; 7, 7:30, 8, 8:30 o'clock and still the rooms were empty. Then a tiny note was handed to him, and another, and another. They were from the professors and lady artists, pleading some excuse for not being able to keep the engagement. What could it all mean? Some kind neighbors in the opposite street, noting his bewilderment through the open windows, sent him a newspaper with the marked copy of the article. He read it and sank back in his chair; it was false, but he was thenceforth a ruined man. The next day the conservatory was closed, and it was said that that night the ghosts and spirits held wild carnival in the old house in celebration of their triumph. Then it remained closed for a long while; in the exposition year a northerner leased it, and opened a large boarding-house. White lace curtains fluttered at the great iron-barred windows and a gilded sign, "The Mansion House," hung from the old balcony; but the neighbors shook their heads; in a few weeks the sign was down, the house was again closed; who would care to stay over night in the dreary ghost-haunted apartments?

And now comes another chapter in the history of this old house, a chapter that marked its culminating page last week, when after many years the great rooms were again thrown open and invaded by a curious, motley crowd bidding for the valued collections of a life time as they fell beneath the auctioneer's hammer. Of late years few in the rue Royale supposed the building was inhabited, for the doors and windows were always closed, and passers-by thought the place had at length been abandoned to the ghosts and evil spirits that are said to infest it. And yet, for more than three years there had been living there Jules Edouard Vignie, the son of Colonel Vignie, a prominent soldier of the French revolution and a colonel in the old days of the crack militia companies of New Orleans. At that time M. Vignie was a partner of the well-known auctioneer, Gabriel de Ferrier, and in his office Jules was employed after leaving college. Even in those days he was considered an eccentric man, an antiquarian by nature, and an assiduous collector of ancient bric-a-brac and pictures. After the war, like many another, the fortunes of the family changed, and gradually they slipped out of the old life in Royal street. Embittered by reverses, Jules became more eccentric and retired than ever, and many supposed him dead. Some weeks ago a piece of black crepe fluttered on the doors of the haunted house, and curious neighbors mounted the great stairway, wondering that any one should have lived and died in those old rooms without the gossips in the rue Royale reporting the fact. Up, up, the great steps they ascended, and what was their surprise to see on all sides, instead of abject poverty, grand old pieces of furniture, antique sofas, cabinets and libraries, rare and costly pictures, bric-a-brac and bronzes, and old swords and family relics enough to fill a museum. And up in the attic upon a small iron cot, the floor strewn with old papers and debris, Jules Vignie lay dead. Some money secreted in a corner supported the idea that there was more hidden elsewhere. The mattresses were ripped open and about \$2500 was found and valuables amounting to several thousand more.

On Monday last an auction of the curious effects took place. All day the house was thronged by an eager, curious crowd, not only of our own people but the strangers within our gates. And amid the din of the auction mart the old story of Madame Lalaurie was revived. The slave quarters were visited, and, heedless of the mass of feathers from the open mattresses which covered the floor, umindful of the broken glass-ware, the dust and debris and old French papers, which fairly littered the rooms and galleries, ladies in elegant toilets, pressed eagerly through, peering into every corner of the old house, examining the great iron bars and curious locks and hinges, or laboriously mounting the rickety stairway to the haunted belvedere.

And here the writer stood for a moment, looking down upon the paved courtyard, the mysterious well, the latticed windows, and silently she fell to pondering upon the wonderful history of this old house, the strange, true stories, the guests that it had harbored, from Louis Philippe down to the old miser who died there the other day, and musing upon its olden legends and ghostly myths, she wondered if any house in New Orleans could present such successive links of realism and romance, and instinctively queried, "What next?" MARIE L. POINTE.